

BOOK REVIEW

Now, Discover Your Strengths

by Marcus Buckingham and Dr. Donald O. Clifton

reviewed by Joseph C. Piff

The authors used focused research (surveys and interviews of over two million people) conducted by The Gallop Organization over a 30-year period to identify 34 themes of human talent - strengths - common throughout all humans and to develop a theory of human achievement. They go through current knowledge of brain development within the womb and during our infant and toddler years to develop the theory of innate talents. Their theme throughout the book is that most organizations hire people the interviewers like and then try to train these individuals to do the work required by the organization, instead of determining the strengths of each individual and hiring the people most likely to succeed at doing the work of the organization. In other words, while everyone is trainable, greater success is based on strengths-based training rather than training to overcome weaknesses.

With each copy of the book purchased is a unique ID number that can be used to access a web site to take the “StrengthsFinder” test. This test is like a Myers-Briggs evaluation. There are 180 separate questions for which you are given a range of responses between two different preferences. You either strongly agree that you would normally behave like the item on the left or the item on the right, or that your preference (less strong than strongly agree) is for the item on the left or right, or that you are neutral. From these “gut level” responses (you are only given 20 seconds to decide about each question, which I found to be plenty of time), an undisclosed mathematical calculation is made and your top five Strengths are identified. The authors state that, in their experience, these five are highly likely to be at least in your top seven strengths and, therefore, if you re-take the test at a later date, one or two strengths may change, but all five should not.

The authors recommend that you read the first few chapters of the book (about a third) and stop and take the test. Then, as you read the rest of the book, you will be able to compare your strengths to the explanations of all 34 strengths. Obviously, each of us will want to study our own top five. However, I recommend that you read the explanation of all 34 strengths because (1) you may identify some other strengths that are in your next two to five, and (2) you will be working with people who have these other strengths. Each strength is described and three examples of that strength in action are given.

The last half of the book is focused on using the information you have learned about yourself, and people in general, for self-improvement. First, the authors answer a series of questions that arose in their research from individuals who had completed the profiling process. These are questions like “Are there any obstacles to building my strengths?” and “Can my themes reveal whether I am in the right career?” Then, they talk about “Managing Strengths.” Finally, the last chapter addresses “Building a Strengths-based Organization.”

Who should read this book? As you may suspect, the authors do not have a formula to make you an excellent manager – people are just too complex. However, I believe their objective is to help us to understand each other, understand that we all have strengths, but those strengths cause us to approach a problem for different directions, and that diversity, properly managed, yields superior results. This is an excellent book for anyone with management responsibility.